
CZECH JOURNALISTS HAVE SHOWN THEIR FORCE

By Hakop Asatryan editor-in-Chief, OPER independent Armenian magazine, Prague

Last year, Czech journalists fought against a political hold on the public television, supported by a large part of the society.

When, in December 2000, the Czech State Council for Radio and Television elected Jiri Hodac as the new Director-General of Czech television, nobody expected this fact to entail an internal political crisis and that, Hodac, hospitalized, would resign within 22 days. During that time, two impressive rallies demanding Hodac's resignation were held in the very heart of Prague - Wacław Square. Society supported the initiative of TV journalists who had taken the situation under their control and had dictated their demands to the parliamentary parties since already thirty days. Why did it happen? To answer this question one needs, first of all, to analyze the situation faced by the protesting journalists.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS WORTHIER THAN MONEY

Many Czech commentators believe the imperfection of the law adopted in 1991 to be the "trigger" of the issues. As per this law, the state television was nominated as "Public", although the electronic media were subjected to subordination under Radio and Television Council members who were appointed by political parties. Albeit that the law disallowed political influence on mass media, the recent appointments demonstrated quite the opposite. As a matter of fact, the television was the country's political forces' key mouthpiece during some ten years. Political struggles waged around and used the television media. Sometimes, professional journalists fell victims to these struggles, such as Dana Mazalov (educated lawyer), a Europe-known TV journalist, who worked as a Czech Television correspondent in Moscow. She was dismissed for trying to save an injured man. She has been fighting for her rights with the Czech justice for some seven years without any result.

TELEVISION'S INDEPENDANCE ENDANGERED

Journalists were tired of these political games. Furthermore, they were so bored by the top appointments of inexperienced young managers; the latest, Jiri Hodac, disturbed almost all TV employees. Hodac, 50, previously a TV news editor, was at odds with staff as far back as when he was a *BBC* correspondent in Prague. Tomas Pojar, director of the Czech RV's People in Need human rights foundation, believes that Hodac's problems stem from his lack of communication abilities and his misapprehension of situations. Hodac had, at once, dismissed the news department employees and appointed his associates. As he was a "man" of Wacław Klaus, the parliamentary speaker and the leader of the Civil Democratic Union, who is now preparing for the upcoming 2002 parliamentary elections, according to the protesting journalists, the public television's independence has become endangered. Jana Bobosiova, the newly-appointed news department director, has also had contacts with the Klaus party. So,

when the news department editors began to air their broadcasts, Hodac just disconnected same and 80 percent of the country's population spent their Christmas holidays without two channels of the Czech television. It was then that the journalists went on strike. News broadcasts aired by the Hodac team were irregular, but, even during those broadcasts, the Czech logo on the screen was accompanied by the word "Stavka" (a strike). Interestingly, Hodac was supported by a Nova private TV company directed by a person having good contacts with Klaus.

THE STRIKE HISTORY: HODAC'S RESIGNATION

December 26: about 3,000 people held a rally next to the Czech TV principal building to support journalists on strike who had not left the newsroom. Culture representatives and opposition politicians were among them. They demanded Hodac's resignation. Eye-witnesses said that, for some time, the situation at the television was such that the strikers could take control of the TV into their own hands, but they did not do so as they intended to settle the issue in a legal way. On January 4, Director-General Hodac was hospitalized for a heart attack. An ad hoc parliamentary commission began to examine the crisis. Next day, the first rally to support the strikers and freedom of speech was held at Waclaw Square-; between 60,000 and 100,000 people gathered together. Alongside the ordinary citizens were the pick of the Czech intelligentsia. Over 193,000 signatures were collected to support the journalists. Actors, during night performances, called people to back the strikers. At the same time, the parliamentary speaker blamed the journalists for representing some others' interests. In particular, he pointed at a political conflict between two concepts of democracy: one - the standard democracy, and the other - the so-called "havlocratia", thus casting political reproach on President Havel.

RESPECT THE JOURNALISTS ON STRIKE

In his TV speech, Klaus once again backed Hodac, saying that a former BBC correspondent cannot be an authoritarian-style director. On January 4, Prime Minister Milos Zeman told journalists that the TV scandal was actually a struggle between Social Democrats (CSDP and CDU). He considered it absurd that his CSDP party was being blamed for the situation which had emerged. He said he had twice warned the Interior Minister, Stanislav Gross, that the police should not undertake anything against the journalists on strike. People were really tired of these political battles and demanded independence guarantees for the media. Director Hodac continued to control the TV from his hospital bed. However, he resigned, due to bad health, only after the TV Council refused to fulfill both the journalists' demands and the parliamentary decision on Hodac's dismissal. The same day, the strikers held the next many-thousand people meeting demanding, inter alia, to dismiss all the TV employers appointed by Hodac and to disband the Council for Television and Radio. The Czech Chief Trade Union Federation seconded the strikers and demanded the re-employment of 20 TV employees dismissed by Hodac and guarantee against any administrative penalties for journalists who had participated in the strike. Meanwhile, the journalists appointed Ladislav Paluska (former CT financial director - also dismissed by Hodac) to the post of provisional director.

WILL THE CONFLICT BE SETTLED?

Soon after, stormy debates began in the Czech Parliament; on January 12, after a night-long discussion, the deputies adopted a bill to dissolve the State Council for Radio and Television. In addition, following the consultations between Klaus and Zeman, CSDP and CDU decided to back the bill version which provided for the Council members to be appointed by the parliamentary Lower Chamber alone; the Upper House and the President cannot participate in the election of Council members. However, MPs have adopted the other bill providing for the number of Council members to be increased from 9 to 15, and these can only be NGO representatives. Nevertheless, according to Tomas Pojar, a new law should be adopted soon; a new Radio and TV Council would be approved in two weeks, and a new TV Director-General would be appointed in six weeks. Until then, this muddle will reign. Jan Ribar, leading journalist of the influential *MF DNES* newspaper, believes that all that has happened illustrates a bad political scene. "Our democracy has not yet matured enough to meet the Western European standards."